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KOISHI, Emi. The Origin of the Ancient Greek Griffin: A Reconsideration of Iconographical Development

The griffin of the ancient Greek world is a well-recognized hybrid creature whose iconography is known from a seal-impression found in Crete dating from the Middle Minoan II–III period (19–17 B.C.E.). The Aegean griffin has an eagle's head and lion's body with wings, and is depicted as a hunter in hunting scenes or as a guardian or attendant of a deity or altar. Their most characteristic feature is that they never attack humans, in contrast with lions that frequently attack human warriors. The iconography of griffins changed in the beginning of the Archaic period (8 B.C.E.). While the eagle head has two elongated ears and a knob-like sphere on the forehead in the Archaic period, a dorsal fin is added at the back of the neck in the Classical period (5 B.C.E.), although the knob disappears. The role of griffins also changes, to attack humans as well as animals.

Many studies have revealed that the origin of the iconography and the roles of griffins in 8 to 7 B.C.E. Greece are similar to those found in the Orient around the same time. There are two main reasons for this: first, there was a Dark Age between the two ages, the Aegean Bronze Age and the Ancient Greek Age. Second, the iconography of griffins in the Archaic period and in the Orient is similar, while there is little similarity with the Aegean griffin. However, little is known about the knob-like feature on the griffin's head in the Archaic period, as well as the addition of dorsal fin to the back of the griffin's neck in the Classical period. It is doubtful that one motif (the griffin) changed entirely into another motif, even if there was a Dark Age between the two periods.

The purpose of this study is to reconsider the continuity between the Aegean Bronze Age and the Ancient Greek Age through research on the iconography and roles of the griffin in each period. In this study, I will also focus on another motif, the so-called Minoan Genius from the Aegean Bronze Age, which, like the lion-headed griffin of the Orient, stands on two hind legs like a human and has a dorsal appendage on its back. In many cases, the dorsal appendage resembles fins. The representation of one of the dorsal fins sometimes recalls the knob-like feature on the griffin in the Archaic period. It is known that the Minoan Genius is an attendant of a goddess like the griffin.

Through the research of the iconographies and roles of the griffin in each period, I conclude that the roles of the griffin/Minoan Genius are common in both ages (as guardians, attendants of a deity or hunter), and it does not attack humans in the Ancient Greek era. Moreover, there are local Greek iconographic characteristics, namely the Aegean, Archaic, and Classical griffins/Minoan Genii that have four lion's legs and the dorsal fin or knob on the forehead. Therefore, I suggest that there are continuities of the griffin/Minoan Genius between the Aegean Bronze Age and the Ancient Greek Age. Although merely speculative, these conclusions will contribute to our understanding of the formation of early Ancient Greek art, through a focus on the motifs found in the Aegean Bronze Age.

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